

Beyond the books: Indiana history you can see, hear, and feel.

By Sally Campbell Grout

Anyone who's been in fourth grade in Indiana has flipped through the pages of Indiana history. But the fourth grader in all of us knows that history is so much more interesting, memorable, and personal when you can visit the places where the event took place, or see the tools the ancient people used, or read the words in the historical figure's own hand. These Indiana destinations, and many others, preserve and celebrate the chapters of Indiana's past.

A natural place to start.

Where do you start exploring the Indiana of long ago? A good place to begin: the Indiana Historical Society (800-447-1830). The society itself has been around since 1830. Today, the stories of Indiana's past are preserved and presented at a 165,000 square foot headquarters in downtown Indianapolis. Inside, an extensive library maintains a huge collection on Indiana and the Old Northwest. Changing exhibits, which explore a variety of subjects, and a full schedule of performances—including concerts, plays and lectures—mean you'll want to return again and again.

The other first step.

Another great place to begin your journey to yesterday's Indiana: the Indiana State Museum (317-232-1637) in Indianapolis. This spacious three-story destination maintains a collection of more than 400,000 artifacts and uses interactive exhibits to tell the story of Indiana's early days and recent times, and even offers glimpses of what Hoosiers might expect in the future. The collection is a unique combination of art, science, and culture that gives visitors a feeling of what Indiana was like from the time the land formed, through the days of Native Americans and pioneers, to today and beyond.

One song, lots of stories.

Even though Jim Neighbors offers a stirring rendition of "Back Home Again In Indiana," the state song is officially "On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away," perhaps because this rolling river has been such an important part of Indiana. Pottawatomies, Shawnee, and Mound Builders once lived along its banks, and George Rogers Clark and William Henry Harrison traveled its waters. Banks of the Wabash, Inc. (765-494-330) invites you to canoe, hike, bike, and explore your way through the area, visiting historic sites, covered bridges, and parks along the way.

An idea preserved.

From the time we get our first Fisher-Price farmyard play set, we think we know what a barn looks like. But a trip to the Fulton County Historical Museum (574-223-4436) may change your image. In the late 1800s and the early 1900s, some farmers, including many in Indiana, built round barns, with one benefit being that it would be easier to feed livestock from one central location. Today, just a handful of these unique round barns still exist. You can see them on a driving tour through the county.

Get out those bread recipes.

Can you imagine doing any job the way they did it more than 150 years ago? At Bonneyville Mill in Bristol (574-535-6458) they can—and do. When you visit, historical interpreters will lead you through what they call the “daily grind.” The mill is open every day from May through October, and grinds corn, wheat, rye and buckwheat. While you’re in Bristol, visit the Elkhart County Historical Museum & Rush Memorial Center (574-848-4322), where more than 20,000 artifacts serve as sort of a timeline from the past to the present. Artifacts are arranged by time period and theme. Exhibits include The Children’s Room, The Emporium, and The Native American Hallway.

The game at its best.

Perhaps one of the most beloved chapters in Indiana’s history is the story of the 1954 State Basketball Champions from Milan. Back when every school competed in one class, Milan was the small school with an enrollment of just 162 students who defeated Muncie Central, a school with an enrollment of 1,662. The event inspired the fictional movie “Hoosiers,” but you’re welcome to get acquainted with the real players and events at the Milan ’54 Experience (812-654-2772) in Milan. See artifacts, photographs, and memorabilia from that glorious time. Take home a book, a basketball, a poster or another treasure from the ’54 Store. Many items are autographed.

Rolling on the river.

When you look out at one of our nation’s big, rolling rivers, can’t you just imagine a vintage steamboat traveling along its waters? That picture will be even clearer after a visit to the Howard Steamboat Museum and Mansion in Jeffersonville (812-283-3728). In their day, the Howards were premier steamboat builders, and the mansion tells the story of their success and of the industry. The 1894 home features original furnishings, brass chandeliers, stained glass windows, intricate carvings, and a grand staircase. For those as interested in the industry as they are in the life it afforded, you’ll also see steamboat tools, models, photographs, paintings, half-hull models and other artifacts.

A traveler’s respite.

Built between 1828 and 1834, the National Road was one of America's first roads, and has been helping people travel east and west ever since. (Although back then, "horsepower" had a whole different meaning.) When weary folks needed a rest as they worked their way across Indiana, they were welcome to stop at the place that's now the Huddleston Farmhouse Inn Museum (765-478-3172). At this restored 1841 resting place, you can see what life was like for John and Susannah Huddleston, their 11 children, and the travelers who stopped for food and shelter and to rest their horses. The 78-acre farm includes a three-story house, a barn, a smokehouse and a springhouse.

The people who shaped our past.

Many interesting characters in the Indiana story made their mark in Fort Wayne, and you can learn more about them at The History Center (260-426-2882). Tour the home of Miami Chief Jean Baptiste de Richardville, the son of a French fur trader and Miami Indiana Ta-cum-wah. Richardville grew to be one of the wealthiest men in Fort Wayne in the early 1800s, and this home may be the first Greek revival house in Indiana. The History Center also displays a poster which served as greetings from Charles Lindbergh (dropped from his plane as he flew over the city), a dollhouse from 1886, and some Fort Wayne inventions, including the first gas pump.

If this atrium could talk...

It's hard to decide what's most surprising about the West Baden Springs National Historic Landmark (812-936-4034). Is it the 100 x 200 foot domed atrium? The fact that this onetime gathering place of the rich and famous later served as a home for monks? Or is it the almost unbelievable truth that this incredible structure sat abandoned and falling into disrepair for years? Thankfully, West Baden is being restored, and plans are in place to eventually turn it back into a high-end resort, welcoming guests for overnight stays for the first time since 1932. In the meantime, you can tour the breathtaking structure and its incredible gardens, hearing more interesting stories of this 1902 structure along the way.

Picture perfect.

If a picture is worth 1,000 words, Parke County (765-569-5226) must be worth at least 3,200. Here, you'll find 30 of the state's historic covered bridges, entitling Parke County to call itself "The Covered Bridge Capitol of the World." Grab your camera and take a tour; maps are available at two visitor's centers, which are found in an 1879 Jail and an 1883 Depot. You'll find other historic stops along the way, such as the Bridgeton Grist Mill (765-548-0106), and the Historic Mansfield Roller Mill (765-344-0741) a three-and-half story 1880s roller mill that still grinds occasionally.

State Historic Sites.

Some homes, communities, and structures are such an important part of Indiana's past, they've been deemed State Historic Sites. Among them: several structures in Indiana's first capital city, including the Corydon Capitol (812-738-4890); Indiana's first capital city; Vincennes State Historic Sites (812-882-7422), which reflect the days of the Indiana Territory's capital; and the T.C. Steele State Historic Site (812-988-2785), where you can see more than 70 paintings by the beloved Hoosier artist, and tour his house, studio, and gardens.

More stories are waiting.

To plan your journey through Indiana's past, and to get the most out of its present, visit enjoyindiana.com.